

Holmes Warren has worked for more than 60 years to create a fertile, easy-care romney that is the backbone of New Zealand sheep farming. He talks to **Jon Morgan.**

Breeding the ideal kiwi romneys

high-fertile sheep, by 1970 he had lifted his lambing percentage at docking to an impressive 133 per cent.

But that was achieved with assistance – the ubiquitous lambing beat, where he and his staff had to patrol the paddocks looking for ewes in difficulty.

So he went looking for the easy-care sheep among his flock on Turanganui, his South Wairarapa farm.

Harsh measures were needed. He put a quarter of the romney stud flock on the hills and for the next 14 years left them to lamb alone. Any that did not rear a lamb were sold.

In the rest of the flock, any ewe that had to be assisted was sent to the meat works. If their lamb survived, it was grown out and also killed.

From this, three free-lambing family lines were discovered that became the backbone of today's flock.

Examination of the pelvic circles of the slaughtered ewes showed why some had difficulties and others did not. Warren was able to get a picture of what an easy-care ewe should look like.

"It starts in the shoulders; they can't be too bulky," he says. His

“The hind legs have got to have the correct geometry. If those legs are too straight they need more energy to walk or climb the hills to graze.”

HOLMES WARREN

brow creases in thought and his faded blue eyes glaze and look inward as he visualises the ideal sheep. "The top of the shoulder blades must be below the backline and the shoulders must blend into the rib cage."

He reaches for a notepad. "The hind legs have got to have the correct geometry." He draws a sloping Z shape with the angles at hip and hock. "If those legs are too straight they need more energy to walk or climb the hills to graze."

He remembers 40 years ago following a mob of hoggets along the 11-kilometre journey to his hill

block. "After five miles, I noticed quite a few lagging at the back. I had a piece of raddle with me so I marked them. Three months later when I drove them back, they were at the back again. I realised they were too thick in the shoulder – they got the heave-ho."

This single-minded determination to improve the productivity of his flock has driven Warren for more than 60 years as a romney breeder. Part of the spur has been financial – 40 years ago more than half his farm's income was from ram sales – but it is a success the nation has benefited from.

He is held in the highest regard among sheep breeders as being one of the biggest influencers of the shape, fertility and hardiness of the modern romney. This was recognised in 1992 with the award of an MBE for services to the sheep industry, an honour he insists was not his alone but was also due to his fellow members of the Wairarapa Romney Improvement Group.

Now 86 with ownership of Turanganui handed over to son Michael 20 years ago, Warren still keeps an active interest in the farm and the flock.

He looks more than 10 years younger than his age, has an acute memory, a head for figures and is a walking advertisement for hip replacements.

"There's still life in the old dog," he says with a chuckle. "I'm useful round the farm; I do quite a bit of tractor work and I'm still involved with selling rams. When there's nothing to do, I go out and find odd jobs."

The Turanganui romney stud began 107 years ago at Pirinoa with Warren's grandfather, also Holmes. Warren's father, David, died in 1944 and he took over in 1948, aged 19.

He inherited a flock of 500 stud ewes with a lambing percentage of 100-105 per cent – "and you worked your butt off to get that," he recalls.

It was the time of the wool boom and studs selected animals on size and fleece weight, judged on eye alone. No account was taken of the number of lambs produced, their survival or weight.

Warren's reasoning was that if he could lift lambing percentages, sheep farming would be more profitable and farmers would come back to him to buy more rams.

At the same time, fertiliser topdressing was lifting pasture quality on the hills and about 10 per cent of his clients were keen to get more fertile sheep.

But fertility has a low inheritance and he made slow going. Then he had a visit from Massey University Professor Al Rae, a world-recognised geneticist, who introduced a system of recording lambing details. He began to find which were his most productive families and the flock's lambing percentage began to rise.

By 1960 it was at 130 per cent and it continued to rise in slow steps. In 1967, wool prices crashed and Turanganui suddenly found its rams in hot demand. "The accent swung onto meat production and farmers were wanting more lambs. I decided that if I didn't advertise, someone else who hadn't done the work I had would beat me to it."

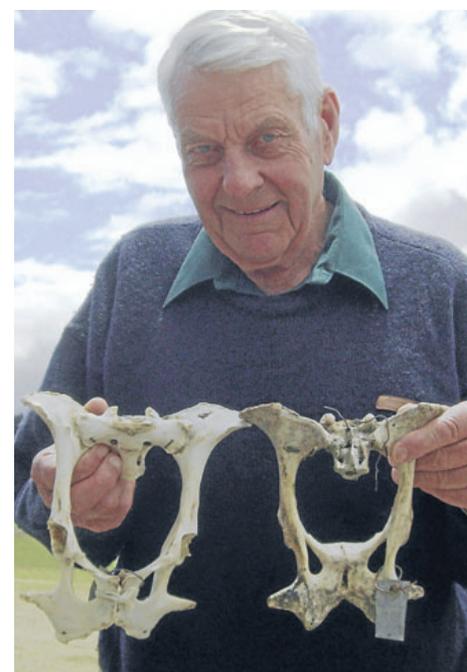


He found a ready market for his stud rams at \$1500-\$1600 each among the 1200 other romney studs, selling 40-50 a year. His commercial rams averaged at about \$80 each, but he sold 1000 of those a year. Today, he and Michael sell 1000 rams annually to 160 clients, half of them in the South Island, from \$650 to \$1250.

The next step was to develop easy-care sheep. "I had a high lambing percentage but I was having to assist too many. That wasn't sustainable."

Once the lambs were born, mothering ability was also an essential trait and this was added to the selection process. It is now the trait Turanganui is most well-known for.

Warren describes it as a two-way street, with both ewe and lambs having the instinct to stick together. "I saw it demonstrated so well at docking time a few years ago in a paddock with 25 ewes, all with triplets at foot. Each ewe and their three lambs



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